Across the Great Lakes region this year, bills have been introduced to ban the manufacture and sale of certain products containing plastic microbeads. This legislative trend began last year, in response to a two-year scientific study of plastic pollution in the Great Lakes. Its conclusion: Microbeads (tiny particles that are often too small to be captured by wastewater systems and that are also part of the trash left on beaches) account for the highest count of plastic pollution in the freshwater system.

At last year’s Great Lakes Legislative Caucus meeting, professor Sherri Mason of State University of New York shared her research findings with legislators from across the basin. In some parts of the Great Lakes, she said, concentrations of plastic are higher than those seen in oceans. Particle counts are particularly high in parts of lakes Erie and Ontario. One concern about the prevalence of these plastics in the Great Lakes is that they are consumed by fish and become part of the food chain.

In February, Indiana lawmakers overwhelmingly approved legislation (HB 1185) to phase in a ban on personal care products and over-the-counter drugs that contain “synthetic plastic microbeads.” Similar to other state proposals, Indiana’s would first prohibit the manufacture of personal care products with plastic microbeads, starting in 2018. A ban on the sale of these products would take effect a year later.

Current state legislative proposals usually establish a longer time frame for prohibitions on over-the-counter drugs with plastic microbeads (in Indiana, for example, the manufacturing ban begins in 2019 and the sales ban in 2020).

Plastic microbeads (5 millimeters or smaller in diameter) are added to skin care products as exfoliators, and can also be found in toothpaste, moisturizers, fragrances and shampoo.

“Destructive ingredients can easily be replaced with natural, biodegradable alternatives,” says Indiana Rep. Patrick Bauer, who attended last year’s caucus meeting and who served as the lead sponsor of HB 1185.